

Peaceful Thai, Violent Malay(Muslim): A Case Study of the 'Problematic' Muslim Citizens of Southern Thailand

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Abstract

This paper tries to understand why the Malay-speaking Muslims of southern-Thailand¹ are viewed as perpetual national security threats by looking at some deep-seated identity constructions that align Malay identity with violence and Thai identity with peace and patriotism. By insisting that southern Thai Malay-Muslims identify as Thai rather than as Malay, the Thai state and its Buddhist citizens view Malay Muslims' insistence on their Malay identity as not only a rejection of Thai-ness but also as a threat to the sovereignty of the Thai nation-state. By comparing the Thai Malays with the Thai Chinese, the most discriminated minority in the history of Thailand, the author argues that forging of economic links within and outside of Thailand has helped the Thai Chinese attain both political and economic success in Thailand while the promotion of separatist identities such as Malay and Muslim have bequeathed the Thai Malays a legacy of violence.

Keywords: *Violence, southern Thai Malay-Muslims, human rights, ethnic/national identities, Thai Chinese*

Introduction

In the rural Malay-Muslim-dominated society of southern Thailand, many negative stereotypes abound. Thai Buddhists, who are the nation's ethno-religious majority but form a minority in the Malay-Muslim-dominated south, perceive Malay-Muslim men as lazy. Lazy because they sit around in the coffee shops drinking coffee or tea heavily sweetened with condensed milk, smoking their hand-rolled cigarettes and chatting with fellow villagers. However, such men are not sitting in the coffee shops just because they have nothing to do. They would have usually finished their daily jaunts to the sea, in the case of fishermen, or to their rice, fruit or vegetable gardens in the case of farmers, and would then spend the rest of the day relaxing their tired bodies before beginning the routine

of their subsistence pursuits the following day. Since the house is often female space, Thai Malay-Muslim men spend their time relaxing in their favourite male domain spot, the coffee shop. Thai Buddhists however label men 'sitting around doing nothing' as lazy. Both Buddhist and Muslim informants tell me that Thai Buddhists, who work to accumulate wealth, see Muslims, who work to satisfy their subsistence needs on a daily basis, as lazy. To rural Muslims, acquiring wealth is contrary to their belief that Allah always provides for humans with his bountiful resources. To accumulate something that will never grow scarce does not make sense in their world view, according to my Malay-Muslim informants of Pattani.

Parallel to this 'lazy Muslim' image is the much harsher 'violent Muslim' assessment. The Thai Malay-Muslim is deemed violent by the Thai Buddhist because he has, over the course of Thailand's history of colonizing the Malay-Muslim south, challenged the sovereignty of the Thai state to govern over him. In recent times, these two culturally ethnocentric Buddhist stereotypes of southern Thai Malay-Muslim men have been given opposite interpretations. While Muslims were seen as both 'lazy' and 'violent' in the past, the current unrest, which has labelled the Malay-Muslim south of Thailand the most violent area in Southeast Asia, has made Buddhists prefer the 'lazy' Malay Muslim to the 'violent' Malay Muslim. At a time when some Malay Muslims are leading a violent insurgency in southern Thailand, Thai Buddhists seem to prefer 'lazy Muslim men' who sit around the coffee shop and do nothing. They are seen as not posing a threat to Thailand. They are considered safe Thai citizens who do not threaten Thai national security and territorial sovereignty. In such times of violence and bloodshed where blame is laid on Muslim men, those who are seen as 'lazy' are also seen as the best citizens since they are deemed to be innocuous, to be less threatening to Thai national security.

In this paper, I explore the case of the Thai Malay-Muslims of southern Thailand as a people whose worth as Thai citizens hinges upon whether they pose a security threat to Thailand. At the present moment, the violence unleashed by some Thai Malay-Muslims has caused them to be viewed as security threats in the Thai national imagination. While the political turmoil in Thailand in the recent years has shown how Thai Buddhists have also resorted to violence, the violent Thai Malay-Muslim is often associated with being a threat to national security. While the current political crisis has destabilized the economy and government in Thailand, the predominantly Thai Buddhist protesters are not seen as national security threats in that they are not seen as threatening the

territorial integrity of Thailand. Southern Thai Malay-Muslims, who fought an insurgency in Thailand in the 1970s with the aim to separate and bring the Malay-dominated Muslim provinces under Malay-Muslim rule, continue to be viewed as separatists threatening the physical borders of the Thai nation-state. Understanding how and why this view continues to dictate Thai perceptions of their Malay-Muslim citizens and therefore destroys any attempts to bring peace to the region is what this paper seeks to do. By providing a comparison with another minority group in Thailand, namely the Thai Chinese, this paper aims to show why the Thai Malay-Muslims have not been able to become an accepted part of the Thai citizenry.

Why are Thai Muslims Viewed as National Security Threats?

According to Thai media and official government reports, a violent insurgency was launched by Malay-speaking Muslim militants from the Muslim-dominated southern Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat in January 2004.² More than 3,300 people, both Buddhists and Muslims, have died, several thousands have been injured, and schools, government buildings, nightclubs, Buddhist temples, railway stations, the airport in the major southern city of Hatyai, police stations and houses of private citizens have been torched or bombed. Drive-by shootings, killings using bombs, and beheadings are common methods of execution practiced by the aggressors who have included predominantly Muslim insurgents as well as members of the armed security forces who carry out retaliation killings. Why have some Malay-speaking Muslims of southern Thailand resorted to unleashing violence against the Thai state, which is governed by rules and principles often derived from Buddhism?

Before I answer that question, let me give a quick review of Muslims in Thailand.

Who are the Malay Muslims of Thailand?

Muslims in Thailand form the second largest ethnic minority after the Chinese. Numbering between four and six million in a population of about 62 million citizens and maintaining around 2,700 to 2,900 mosques, Muslims make up the largest religious minority in Theravada Buddhist Thailand (Scupin 1998: 229; Gilquin 2005).³

Thai Muslims comprise two broadly defined categories.⁴ First, there are the Malay Muslims who speak the Malay language and reside pri-

marily in the four southern Thailand provinces of Pattani, Yala, Satun and Narathiwat. Malay-speaking Muslims comprise more than 70 percent of the total Muslim population in Thailand. The other category of Muslims is the Thai-speaking Muslims who reside in Central, North and Northeast Thailand (Scupin 1998; McCargo 2006: 3).

Although Muslims are a minority in Thailand, Malay Muslims of the south make up over 70 percent of the population in the four southern provinces. Most of the Malay Muslims in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat speak several local varieties of the Malay language while many in Satun have begun using the local southern Thai dialect as their mother tongue. The present-day Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat comprise an ancient Malay kingdom named Patani.

The question of 'Malay' is a highly contested one in academic scholarship. Summing up these contradictions is a recent edited volume *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identities across Boundaries* (Barnard 2004). The authors in this volume refer to the nature of Malay-ness as 'one of the most challenging and confusing terms of Southeast Asia' (p. xiii). Since it is difficult to pinpoint the precise meanings and origins of 'Malay', the authors say that we should focus at the level of everyday life where people in various parts of Southeast Asia explain Malay-ness as they live it. This very anthropological understanding of the term 'Malay' can be applied to southern Thailand as well where the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun, as well as the three districts of Songkhla bordering the province of Pattani, are seen by the local Malay-speaking southern Thais as Malay-dominated areas. The inhabitants of this geographical-cultural space are seen by both Thais and Malays alike as speaking various dialects of Malay, practicing Malay culture⁵ and espousing Islam.⁶ Though the Malay language is one of the principal markers of Malay identity in this region, Thai is increasingly spoken among the urban Malays. Yet, the Malay language is predominantly spoken amongst Malays themselves, especially in the rural areas of the four provinces. This self-perception of Malay-ness marked by language, cultural practices, religion and an important shared sense of history of being a people conquered by the Siamese (Thai Buddhist) powers has caused the Malays to see themselves as a distinct ethnic group vis-à-vis Thai Buddhists.

Historical works show that the kingdom of Patani was in existence in the region of southern Thailand since the sixth century when the kingdom began sending diplomatic and trading missions to China (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970: 1). Despite the fact that Patani is reputed as one of the cradles of Islam in Southeast Asia, the date for the Islamization of Patani

is unclear. And so are the facts on how and from where Islam came. However, since Islam was established in northern Malaysia by the late 1300s, Teeuw and Wyatt say that Islam was probably established in Patani by that date as well (1970: 4). Whatever the date for the region's conversion to Islam, it became clear that Muslim traders were calling at its port since the sixteenth century.

What is less clear though is its Malay history. As Barnard and Maier (2004: xiii) write, the question of 'Malay-ness' is 'one of the most challenging and confusing terms of Southeast Asia'. We see a similar confusion in the case of the Malays of southern Thailand as well. Although Patani (here referring to the 'Malay' kingdom of Pattani in southern Thailand) is often included when referring to the notion of 'Malay' (Barnard and Maier 2004: ix), translators of the *Hikayat Patani* (Patani Chronicles), historians Teeuw and Wyatt, record that the name Pattani came from a Patani princess who was so impressed with the bravery of a mousedeer that turned around and attacked the hunting dogs of the princess and then disappeared on the banks of the Pattani river that she spoke the following words, *ma hai sia thii trong pata ning* ('it disappeared on this beach'). This is a very interesting record since all the words spoken in this sentence are in Thai except for the last two words *pata ning*, which in the Pattani Malay dialect mean 'this beach'. Could this mean that the founders of the kingdom of Pattani were Thai-speaking Malays who, like their counterparts in the many villages of Songkhla and Satun, speak a mixture of Thai and Malay? Virginia Matheson (1979) writes in her article based on concepts of Malay ethos in indigenous Malay writings that there is no attempt in the court-based *Hikayat Patani* to 'present Patani as part of a wider (Malay) cultural or ethnic unity' (1979: 354). There seems to be only one reference to *Melayu* (Malay) in the *Hikayat Patani* and it refers to Johor. A Patani trader to Johor discovers that the *tertib Melayu* (correct Malay procedure) is different from the practices of Patani and asks the Johorians to teach him proper Malay *adat* or practices, which he equates with that of the kingdom of Johor in what is now southern Malaysia. What made Patani a Malay kingdom as classified by many authors and historians seems to be the Malay language as used in Thailand writing of the *Hikayat Patani*. If language is the only criterion used to categorize Patani as a Malay kingdom, then it is little wonder why contemporary Thai Malays use the Malay language as a strong marker of Thai Malay identity and Thai Malay exclusiveness. Patani was not a Malay kingdom in the sense of being part of the Malay cultural world except linguistically and Patanians had to learn from Johor its Malay customs.

The 'Violent' Malay(Muslim)

Beginning in 1786, these southern Malay-speaking provinces were 'conquered' by the first Siamese king of the current Chakri dynasty and subsequently absorbed gradually into the Thai polity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these provinces were officially incorporated into the Thai state as a result of treaties made between the Thai government and the British colonial government in then Malaya. The status of these provinces changed from independent states that paid tribute to their overlord at various times since the thirteenth century in return for protection against molestation by powerful rivals to being under more direct rule of the Siamese polity. Siamese administrators were dispatched to these Malay-Muslim provinces to rule according to Siamese law while the Malay-Muslim rulers were left to adjudicate over religious matters. The most important sign that the Malay rulers had lost ruling power over their Malay subjects was when the Siamese administrators took over the task of collecting taxes from the local people. Previously, the Malay-Muslim rulers performed this role and used part of the taxes collected to pay the tribute to their overlord. Now they were totally absolved of this role and in a sense lost direct control over their subjects.

As the three provinces came more under the influence of the Siamese government, there were several rebellions against Siamese rule by the local elites. These were successfully contained by the Siamese forces but the periodic rebellions continued. While they often lasted for short periods of time and were quickly put down, the rebellions have grown more violent since the late 1960s as a result of the Thai government's forced assimilation and sometimes highly racist and ethnic chauvinistic policies that undermined Malay-Muslim culture, language and identity. An organized separatist movement consisting of several groups began what became the longest running insurgency in the history of Thailand. During the 1960s and 1970s periodic bombings of police and military installations, torching of schools and government offices were mounted by various separatist factions to resist repressive Thai policies (Scupin 2005). Finding that military responses were not effective in stemming this violence, the Thai government developed more tentative pluralistic policies that were aimed at integrating the Malay-Muslim provinces. By the late 1980s, the irredentist violence subsided and the Malay-Muslim communities became actively involved in civil political institutions in Thailand. However, periodic outbreaks of violent activities still festered in the Muslim south as a stark reminder of the presence of unsatisfactory elements within the southern Malay-Muslim population.

This periodic violence took a new turn in January 2004 when Malay-Muslim insurgents raided a military camp in Narathiwat, stole over 400 weapons and killed four Buddhist soldiers after separating them from the Muslim ones.⁷ This daring attack on a military post, seen as a symbol of law and order in the Muslim south, was seen as an affront to the state. The government of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra took swift military action against the Malay-Muslim population in the south. However, the violence and killings only increased and to date more than 3,300 people have died, schools, Buddhist temples, government buildings and nightclubs have been torched or bombed and many Buddhists have moved out of the region for fear of attacks on them by Malay-Muslim insurgents. Malay Muslims, too, have undergone pain, loss and psychological trauma where they have been forced by both security forces as well as the military to provide support and information regarding the perceived enemies. Relationships of trust and friendship between Buddhists and Muslims have broken down. Malay Muslims, too, have had their families and lives torn apart in cases where family members have been killed or injured or where families found themselves in conflict because of differences in loyalties among the different family members. Currently, the south of Thailand is the most violent region in Southeast Asia and Malay Muslims here have suffered the most, labelled as violent, fanatics, separatists and terrorists.

The 'Peaceful Thai'

At present, the general Muslim population in the south of Thailand is no longer viewed as comprising lawful Thai citizens but instead as containing elements that are threats to national security. We have seen how the image of the 'violent Malay Muslim' has been constructed in the Thai national imagination as a result of the incessant wars that the Malay-speaking Muslims of the south fought against what they perceived as the unjust and discriminatory rule of the Thai-Buddhist government whose political legitimacy was often compared to that of a neo-colonialist power. The socially constructed 'violent Malay Muslim' image in Thailand is in contradistinction to another socially constructed image, that of the 'peaceful Thai'.

Let us investigate the process of this social construction.

In the history of western colonial excursion into Southeast Asia, Thailand stands out as the only country in the region that successfully resisted colonization by the six major western colonial powers that occupied Southeast Asia, namely, the Portuguese, French, British, Spanish,

Dutch and American. This non-colonized status is a great source of pride for Thais and is exemplified in the name of the country, Thailand. Once the absolute monarchy was overthrown and a constitutional monarchy set up in its place in 1932 with forms of government ranging from military dictatorship to electoral democracy, the name of the country changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939.⁸ The government's decision to change the name of the country has been discussed by two historians in their recent works. Terwiel argues the name change was 'part of a campaign to foster values that would be recognized as cultured in the international world' while Wyatt says that the name change was intended to signify 'the country belonged to the Thai as opposed to the economically dominant Chinese' (Barme 1992: 147).

There are essentially two meanings to the word Thailand.

1. 'Land of the free' where the word *thai* is the word for 'free'.⁹
2. 'Land of the Thai people'
 - a. where Thai is essentially an ethnic group, Tai, whose constituents occupy land that stretches from southern China to mainland Southeast Asia;¹⁰
 - b. Thai as citizens of Thailand.

Though it appears that the two meanings bear little relationship to one another, in fact, they are closely linked. The Thais (by ethnicity and nationality) are a free people because they have never been colonized by a foreign imperial power. Those who are Thai by ethnicity or nationality are testimony to the freedom from colonization of the Thai nation-state. Ethnicity and nationality are intrinsically tied to freedom; ethnicity and nationality are intrinsically tied to the Thai nation-state. So, Thai people can never threaten the peace and security of the Thai nation. But one group in Thailand has, and continues to threaten Thai national security and territorial sovereignty. This is the Malay Muslim, the violent Malay Muslim who wants to break up the territory of Thailand. He is not Thai by ethnicity and refuses to be Thai by nationality.

Thai Malays and the Thai Nation

As a Malay-speaking¹¹ Muslim, the Thai Malay can never be considered an ethnic Thai where the latter is identified as speaking a Tai language (commonly found in mainland Southeast Asia including Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) and is a Buddhist. This ethnic-religious-linguistic identification complex is often a characteristic of group identification in Southeast Asia.¹² However, within

this ethnic-religious-linguistic kaleidoscope of Southeast Asia, another marker of identity, often for the purposes of creating a nation-state, is nationality.

In Thailand, the process of nation-building was a little different from the rest of Southeast Asia. As mentioned earlier, Thailand was never colonized. What became its geo-body (Thongchai 1994) or political-territorial boundaries were formed as a result of forced treaty enactments with European governments (especially French and British) and the United States (Vandergeest 1993: 139). Thailand, therefore, inherited a motley crew of different ethnicities including Mon, Karen, Burmese, Khmer (Cambodian), Vietnamese, Lao and Malay within its borders. The peoples belonging to these different ethnic groups, with relatives living across the border from them in Thailand, were brought together into the Thai nation-state as a result of anti-colonial struggles in Thailand's neighbouring countries. They were brought into the Thai national fold as a result of the anti-colonial movements outside of Thailand that resulted in the colonial powers seeking to strengthen their own legitimacy to rule in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia by more strongly defining and policing national borders. And because the different ethnic groups in Thailand did not have a shared history of fighting western colonial powers, other means were necessary to integrate them into Thai society. This integration was seen in the aim of the Thai state to give all citizens a common identity – a Thai identity. Because of the constructed link between Thai identity and national pride and loyalty, all efforts were made to convert the various ethnic groups in Thailand into embracing a common Thai identity. Such Thai-icizing efforts have ranged from austere policies of assimilation to less drastic integration and more flexible approaches of defining Thai-ness through civil society.

And defining Thai-ness has been a most important aspect of identification with the Thai nation. In his brilliant book *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (1994), Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul writes that the construction of national identity is often done in opposition to what it is not. The discourse of the modern nation-state usually presupposes a two-way identification: 'positive by some common nature, identity or interests; negatively by differences with other nations' (Thongchai 1994: 3). 'Positive' ways of defining Thai-ness have included the monarchy and Buddhism as the most important elements of the nation, love of national independence (free from colonization), tolerance and compromise or assimilation to civilized Thai culture (Thongchai

1994: 4). While there is never a clear definition of what Thai-ness entails, Thais are often better able to identify what is un-Thai, thus defining the domain of Thai-ness from the outside (*ibid.*). Often, reference to un-Thai-ness is done by creating an Other. One such un-Thai Other is codified in the term *khaek*. This term covers the peoples and countries of the Malay peninsula, the East Indies, South Asia and the Middle East without any distinction. *Khaek* also denotes Muslim (Thongchai 1994: 5).

So we can see how, in defining Thai-ness, an unclear category, one side result is the creation of the Malay Muslims as un-Thai.

And in the recent upsurge of violence in the south of Thailand, the Malay Muslim has become even more un-Thai by challenging the integrity of Thailand's borders and threatening national security. This threat to the state is the single most aggressive challenge that southern Thai Malay-Muslims have issued to the sovereign Thai nation-state.

This threat issued by some Malay Muslims to the Thai state has caused a counter-reaction from the Thai security forces, which has unfortunately only alienated the Malay-Muslim community and even converted some Muslims to militancy (McCargo 2008). The perceived lack of cooperation from the Malay Muslims, the breakdown of intelligence in the region and the involvement of even women and children in some of the blockades and demonstrations¹³ have unfortunately led the Thai security forces to at times ignore basic human rights values and launch all-out assaults against the southern Thai Malay-Muslims. However, such abuses of human rights by state agents are often justified by prevailing images in the society that serve to paint the victims as national security threats. Below, I review the situation of human rights abuses in southern Thailand.

Violence, Human Rights and the Southern Thai Malay-Muslim

The crisis of the contemporary state springs from its differentially successful monopolization of power and the contradiction between it and the demands of peripheralized people(s) who through resistance have created new subject positions that challenge fundamentally the definitions of who and what ought to be repressed (Nagengast 1994: 109).

In her review essay on the anthropology of violence and the state, Carole Nagengast (1994: 111) writes that the state, by virtue of its monopoly over violence (cf. Weber), reads any opposition from its citizens as violence against it. The remedy for this is often oppression or

state-sponsored violence or terror. In fact, the state is often 'the greatest instigator of cycles of violent human rights abuses as it seeks to suppress change and prevent opposition movements from undermining its legitimacy' (Nagengast 1994: 115). That is because the state has the express intention of realizing certain social, ethnic, economic and political goals in the realm of public affairs (Nagengast 1994: 114). Because of this express objective, political violence is tolerated and justified by the state as acts of preserving the sanctity and stability of the state and the nation. However, state leaders everywhere claim respect for universal human rights and deny that their acts constitute torture, violence or terror, instead preferring to characterize them as necessary measures to insure order and respect for the law (Nagengast 1994: 115).

In the case of southern Thailand, we see a similar situation. The Thai Malay-Muslims have been the only group to constantly challenge the legitimacy of the rule of the Thai state over the Malay-Muslim south ever since this area was conquered by the Thai-Buddhist monarchy over two hundred years ago. When the Thai government tried to assimilate all minority groups in Thailand in the belief that sharing a common identity would give them a heightened sense of belonging to the Thai nation-state, which by extension would remove any threat that they could pose to the Thai state, its assimilation efforts were violently challenged by only one group – the Malay Muslims. One reason is because the Thai policy of integration sought to sever the link between Islam (religion) and Malay-ness (ethnicity) (Christie 1996: 186). In its purest form, the Thai policy has been aimed at the creation of a Thai-speaking population that uses Arabic in the mosques and in the pursuit of Islamic studies, with Malay withering away as a quaint local dialect. In addition, attempts have been made to translate the key religious texts into Thai, and even gradually to Thai-icize Malay by using the Thai script for the Malay language (Christie 1996: 186-87).

The Thai government has sought to integrate the whole Islamic identity from the school right down to the mosque level. Some of their political programs for assimilation shared ideological characteristics with other 'national revolutions' at that time. For example, the ultra-nationalist government of Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram who came into power in 1938 sought to create a single Thai nation-state that included a modernization program designed to break down backward customs and uniformity in language and social behaviour. This political program was very similar to national revolutions around the world at that time such as that of Kemal Ataturk of Turkey. Like

Ataturk's reforms in Turkey, Phibunsongkram's 'Royal Decree prescribing customs for the Thai people' of 1941 contained elements of westernization – cutlery to replace customary methods of eating with fingers; western-style hats, trousers, and dresses to replace traditional clothing and a prohibition on betel-chewing – along with an emphasis on national pride and unity. In Muslim areas, for example, the Friday holiday was banned and steps were begun to phase out Muslim law. Muslims saw this as a threat to their ethnic and religious identity and there could be no clearer justification for a new jihad. It was about this time that the modern Pattani separatist and irredentist movements began (Christie 1996: 176-77).

The state therefore incorporates cultural and political forms, representations, discourse, practices, and activities and specific technologies and organizations of power that taken together help to define public interest, establish meaning and define and naturalize available social identities (Nagengast 1994: 116). However, these often static and unitary forms of representations and discourse locate absolute power in the state. Citizens who find themselves victimized by these unitary representations struggle against the state to seek legitimacy for practicing and retaining their own representations. In the ensuing struggle, human rights are not only violated but such violation is justified as not violation at all. One such way is through the creation of certain myths. One such myth that characterizes the modern rational nation-state is that 'it is unthinkable ... that a state would typically and openly exercise its power, through violence, even torture and terrorism' (Nagengast 1994: 120). Hence all violence exercised by the state is legitimated by fitting into existing, acceptable discourses: patriotism, retaliation for real or imagined past injustices, separatism, terrorism, communism, subversion, anarchy, the need to preserve the state's territorial integrity, the need to protect the nation from subversion through ethnic cleansing, the fight against crime, the war on drugs (ibid.).

Many states use such rhetoric to justify their suppression of groups fighting against them. During the dirty war in Argentina, one general is reported to have said, 'Democracy must be protected for wrong ideas spread like cancer if they are not excised' (Nagengast 1994: 121). A Turkish prison official who tortured Kurdish prisoners referred to the Kurdish movement for independence by saying that 'communism is against the law here, so is separatism' (ibid.).

Thailand has used similar rhetoric by calling the Malay-Muslim insurgents 'terrorists', 'murderers', 'wayward, jobless youths', 'unpatriotic',

'separatists', etc. By highlighting the intent and actions of the insurgents, which have included destruction of lives of Thai citizens and public property, the Thai government, especially under the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, had often justified their high-handed acts of violence and terror against suspected Malay-Muslim militants.

If human rights abuse by the state is justified as not abuse, then can people like Thai Malay-Muslims clamouring for possible separate statehood call their right to self-determination a human right? Thai Malay-Muslims, like many subordinate groups challenging the power of rule of the state over them, are historical victims of an internal colonization as well as victims of the way a colonial power (the British) carved up the Thai-Malaysian border. Their claim to self-rule is based on the prejudice and injustice that they have suffered under Thai rule, as well as their claim to rights to practice and retain their language and culture. On the part of the state, its attempt to absorb these subalterns through assimilation or acculturation has resulted in violent episodes of oppression and even ethnocide. It is important to note that since 1945, state-sponsored violence towards ethnic and political groups has resulted in more deaths, injuries and general human suffering than all other forms of deadly conflicts including international wars and colonial and civil wars (Stavenhagen 1990 in Nagengast 1994: 126). If so, can this not be called blatant violation of human rights?

If we look at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article One in the two added covenants to the UDHR states:

All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

In her analysis of this statement, Nagengast (1994: 126) argues how the interpretation of this statement has been problematic because the definition of peoples is 'both contested and confused with other categories such as minorities.' Minorities do not have a right to self-determination, peoples do. And the peoples who have successfully claimed self-determination are those who were colonized by a colonial power like the colonized nations of Africa or recently occupied as in the case of East Timor in Indonesia. Minorities are often told to find justice within their own borders (Nagengast 1994: 127). Hence it is often left to states to define what a people means and the UN message is that states should avoid interfering in the sovereign decision of other states as to what constitutes a people (Nagengast 1994: 128). Thus, groups of people seeking self-determination within individual nation-states have much stacked against them.

The Thai Chinese and Thai Malay: A Comparison

According to Canadian sociologist Peter Vandergeest, most modern societies are governed by the closely linked twin traditions of regulation and universalistic rights. Thailand, as a good example, reveals how increasing state regulation of society produced struggles based on universalistic or individual rights. Both these phenomena were institutionalized under the auspices of the nation-state through citizenship with the intention of effective rule (Vandergeest 1993: 133). However, citizenship did not fail to exclude non-national differences that people embodied, including class, gender, ethnicity, kin and/or factions. In fact, it created a space for subaltern action in counter- or anti-hegemonic practices as Scott (1985, 1990) so clearly shows to be the case among peasants generally.

In the case of Thailand, Vandergeest (1993) argues that the Thai state's adoption of a western colonial model of government as a way to preempt western colonial incursion (Thailand remained the only country in Southeast Asia that was not colonized by a western power) undermined the old system of authority. The new system of governance, which was adopted after Thailand became a democratic nation-state in 1939, was not able to offer a new basis of legitimate authority. Villagers' rejection of the officials' leadership forced the officials to use coercion and violence to implement their policies. This contributed to the growth of organized resistance in the country by the 1970s, including the longest-running insurgency in the Muslim south, which has received much support from the peasantry (Vandergeest 1993: 150).

The Thai state's attempt to create Thais out of the different ethnicities in the country saw many policies of national integration attempted by many Thai heads of state. One common theme in all these policies was the fact that the relationship between peoples within the boundaries of the Thai state had to be based on sharing a common heritage from the past. Two important criteria were the Thai language and Buddhist religion. All peoples speaking varieties of the Thai language and espousing the Buddhist faith were considered members of the Thai nation (Keyes 2002: 1179). It is easy to see how such prescription to being Thai excluded several groups, but most significantly the Malay-speaking Muslim of southern Thailand. Inherent in the project of nation-state making was the exclusion of the Malay-speaking Muslim peoples of southern Thailand.

Were the Thai Malays the only ones to be excluded from the nation making process in Thailand? Were other ethnic groups subject to similar abuses as well?

Thai Chinese are seen as the people who have been subjected to the most racist assimilationist policies practiced by successive Thai governments. While the Thai Malays have at least been considered an indigenous group of Thailand, the Chinese were considered foreigners right up till the end of Chinese migration into Thailand in the late 1930s. While other indigenous peoples including Thai Malays were sometimes subject to policies of national integration, the Chinese have consistently been subject to policies of assimilation (*nayobai phasom klom klun*) (Keyes 2002: 1179-80). Chinese schools were shut down or forced to incorporate the regular curriculum of Thai national schools (Chan and Tong 1993: 154). Chinese were forced to give up their names and adopt Thai names instead (Kasian 1997). Yet, the Chinese are today what Craig Reynolds calls a semi-assimilated people (1998: 121). How so?

The ethnic Chinese are the biggest minority in Thailand constituting about 12 percent of the Thai population. They are concentrated mainly in Bangkok and in the provincial capitals as well as in the local markets throughout the kingdom (Phuwadol 1991: 119). Chinese-Thai relations go all the way back to the Sui Dynasty (ca. 600 AD) when a Chinese princess married a Siamese royal prince and left for Siam accompanied by 500 ceramists and other craftsmen (Gambe 2000: 99). Siam had always maintained a subordinate status in its relationship to China, either as a vassal or tributary state (*ibid.*). Chinese merchants became prosperous and increased in numbers during the Ayuthaya period (1350-1767) in Thai history. Their conduct of business was early on achieved by creating trade relations with the Thai monarchs through royal trade monopolies, which were established in 1629. These mutually beneficial economic partnerships, where the Thai disinclination for distant seafaring and demand for foreign trade was fulfilled through the Chinese, led to the favourable economic position of the Chinese. Considered outcasts by their home governments, the Chinese looked to Thai royal patronage for security and protection. They became tax collectors, maritime officials and provincial governors, were conferred Thai titles of nobility and intermarried extensively with the Thais (Phuwadol 1991: 120).

The Chinese relationship with the Thai was more firmly established when Chao Tak Sin, born of a Chinese Teochiu father and Siamese mother, became king in 1767. The Burmese had defeated the Thai and completely destroyed the old capital of Ayuthia in that year. Tak Sin thus became a hero of Siamese independence when he defeated the Burmese and restored the glory of Thailand. Under Tak Sin's rule, the Teochius migrated in large numbers to Thailand. Tak Sin was deposed by Rama

I, his son-in-law, a half-Chinese and founder of the present Chakri dynasty. During the rule of Rama I and his successors, Chinese immigration continued and the Chinese flourished (Phuwadol 1991: 120).

Despite their famed success in Thai society, Hamilton and Waters (1997) caution against a static and a historically continuous account of Chinese entrepreneurship. According to these two sociologists, it was the ability of the Chinese to be flexible, to adapt their businesses to strikingly different contexts that led to their success (1997: 260). They show how the Chinese effectively reconstituted themselves in ways that enabled them to function during three significant periods in Thai history. The first period, the authors label as patrimonial rulership (1997: 262). This period began with the reign of Rama I, founder of the current Chakri dynasty. When the Chakri kings, with the intention of increasing their wealth and position, encouraged Chinese migration, Bangkok became a predominantly Chinese city. Chinese became court officials and administrators and intermarried with members of the Thai royal household. The Chinese were also favoured because they helped expand the royal trade monopoly. The Chinese held state monopolies in opium, gambling, lottery and alcohol. The Thai 'merchant-kings' were thus dependent on Chinese commercial, financial and maritime skills (Gambe 2000: 100). This intimate Thai-Chinese relationship was transformed with the Bowring Treaty in 1855. Essentially, the treaty drawn up by the British forced Siam to open its doors to foreign trade. In order to avoid being colonized by western powers who had occupied every country in Southeast Asia in the name of free trade, Siam maintained its independence by allowing westerners and western modernizing practices in Thailand (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 263). Western merchants established trading houses in Bangkok and Thailand's economy was opened to international influences. Western incursion into Thailand offered increased economic opportunities and the Chinese now began to shift their loyalties to western traders, increasingly becoming compradors for western trading houses (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 264). They concentrated on the export of teak, rice and tin.

By the 1890s, the income of the royal household had fallen. In order to create new wealth, the Chakri kings used Chinese capital, labour and expertise to establish monopoly over capitalist enterprises. This led to the building of infrastructure over which the royal household had effective control and partial ownership. However, the Chinese were no longer dependents of the kings. Instead they became competitors. This was the time where the Chinese became ethnic strangers instead of privileged

insiders (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 265). The hostility towards the Chinese was seen in King Rama VI's label for the Chinese as 'Jews of the East' (ibid.). Thai xenophobia against the Chinese culminated in 1932 when a nationalist military regime came to power in a bloodless coup (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 269). The new government changed to an import-substitution strategy of business that turned whole sectors of the economy into political benefices. The emphasis on self-sufficiency and the corresponding decline in international trade as a result of the end of colonial rule in most parts of Southeast Asia changed the status of economic growth in Thailand. Government ministries began to develop their own state-owned enterprises. The key Chinese businessmen of this era were mostly small businessmen who served as brokers between the Chinese minority and Thai elite. The new government policy that isolated the Chinese essentially created a 'pariah entrepreneurial class' (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 270).

This discriminated status of the Thai Chinese changed by the 1970s and 1980s when Thailand's economy changed from an import-substitution to an export-oriented economy. The newly industrializing Asian countries such as South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore becoming aggressively export-oriented and creating an economic sea change that engulfed the entire region facilitated this. The internationalization and industrialization of the Thai economy created a new group of Thai-born entrepreneurs who not only formed joint ventures with Japanese and American firms but also with the Chinese communities of Hong Kong, Singapore, China and Taiwan (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 273-74). This new group no longer needed the patronage of the Thai elite or royalty to survive in Thailand as their rapid expansion was funded through 'the development of a web of alliances among internationally oriented capitalists, usually from overseas Chinese communities' (Hamilton and Waters 1997: 275). The best examples of this new brand of Thai-Chinese capitalists are the Charoen Pokphand and the Sahapathanapibul groups.

Reynolds (1998: 121) says that despite the anti-Chinese racist policies of the Thai state, Thai Chinese maintained a sense of lineage and affiliation with overseas Chinese in the diaspora that facilitated the expansion of Thai-Chinese business in East and Southeast Asia. Reynolds (1998: 122) mentions how Thai publishers have capitalized on the popularity of the Thai translation of the famous Chinese story cycle *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 'by harnessing episodes in a new genre of business manuals, *How to do business successfully by reading Romance of the Three*

Kingdoms.' Thus Chinese popular culture has become successfully translated and incorporated into Thai business culture. Thus, instead of 'Chinese' disappearing into 'Thai', globalization has in effect limited the extent of Thai assimilationist policies (ibid.).

Chinese existence in Thailand shows a proactive view in the sense that the theoretical interest lies in acknowledging the individuals and the group making the best of the situation, not as mere victims of social forces (Chan and Tong 1993: 165).

The Chinese have managed to successfully integrate into Thai society while avoiding complete assimilation because they are recognized as making the best businessmen in Thailand and in effect contributing to the growth of the Thai economy. In fact, the entire capital city of Bangkok was essentially built on Chinese business money. At the same time, there is an awareness among Chinese businessmen that in order to succeed in Thailand, they have to cooperate with the Thai elites who control the political, military and administrative arenas, but lack the economic basis to bolster their political and military powers. Thus alliances are made between the Thai elites and Chinese businessmen, a complementary relationship that serves the interests of both groups (Chan and Tong 1993: 156).

One important difference between the Thai Chinese and the Thai Malay is the fact that the Chinese have found a niche for themselves in Thailand within a more secular space of business. While the Chinese are Buddhists as well, it is important to note that their practices of Mahayana Buddhism has seeped into the Theravada practices of the Thai. The vegetarian festival that is celebrated in different provinces in Thailand each year is testimony to this. It reveals, in a sense, the plasticity of Thai society to absorb practices that it views as nonthreatening. In the case of the Malay though, Islam and ethnicity have been promoted as the main features of Malay identity. Unlike the commercial interests of the Chinese, which have both benefited Thai society and at the same time has not displaced local Thais from entering the business world with success, Islam and Malay identity in the south serve to not only exclude Thai Buddhists but also threaten the sovereignty of the Thai nation-state. Such threats are not to be entertained; they are to be reacted to harshly.¹⁴

Conclusion

Can the Malay-speaking Muslims of Thailand, who by contrast to the Chinese are a very poor community and more so have resorted to vio-

lence and hence have posed the most severe threat to Thailand, repeat the success of the Chinese?

Nation-states are especially fearful of threats to their sovereignty. And the Thai nation-state is a special case in point. The history of the Thai nation-state is one founded upon fear, writes Thongchai Winichakul in his magnum opus *Siam Mapped* (1994). Though never formally colonized, the physical geo-body of Thailand was carved up and created by the colonial powers of France and Britain that ruled Vietnam and Laos, and Burma and Malaya respectively. While this reduced the land area of Thailand to its south, east and west, Thailand began to fear losing further territory to the newly formed communist states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and the Malay-Muslim separatist agitation in the south. Anthropologist Andrew Cornish (1997: 8)¹⁵ gives one ethnographic account of this fear as portrayed in an army concert in the southern Thai Malay-Muslim province of Yala.

The concert was a mixture of light comedy and popular songs, but had a serious finale in which the performers depicted Thai history in front of a large map of Thailand. The map at first showed the borders of Thailand extending over much of Southeast Asia, but as the narrator spoke actors in various foreign costumes strode onto the stage to steal successive pieces of the map and run away with them. The narrator explained how the Thais were a people constantly under threat, who needed to be constantly vigilant against attempts to steal their territory. One of the stolen segments comprised the whole of present-day peninsular Malaysia, and the southern border region where Yala is located was specifically indicated as one of those areas still under threat.

With the demise of hard-core communist ideology in the northern Southeast Asian countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the only challenge that Thailand faces to its physical borders and national sovereignty today comes from the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand. A people who have suffered the consequences of Thailand's assimilationist and integrationist policies, today's Thai Malays are being confronted with a crisis in Malay identity (Jory 2007: 19-20). Hence their greater appeal to Islam, which gives them a more secure sense of identity in a Thailand that allows space for Muslim identity (since there are Thai-speaking Muslims all over Thailand who have not posed a security threat and in fact live peacefully as Thais and as Muslims, an ideal that the Thai state strongly supports) but not Malay identity, which is seen as an Other and hence not being able to assimilate into Thai-ness (Fraser 1966: 89). And the current resistance, which has taken on an Islamic tone but has no clearly articulated objectives, is perhaps a symptom of the

confused ideology of the movement in the midst of the void left by the obliteration of Patani Malay identity,' writes historian of Thai society Patrick Jory (2007: 20). If the destruction of Patani Malay identity by the Thai state is the result of a rootless new generation of Patani Malay youth currently lashing out violently at the Thai state, then does the future spell doom for the southern Thai Malay-Muslims?

Perhaps it is pertinent to end with hope with a quote from historian of Thai society, Craig Reynolds (2005: 36), 'Nation is forever in the act of construction. It is a building that will never be finished.' And within that unfinished space, perhaps the Thai Malays will be able to carve out a space for their peaceful existence as Thais and as Malays and as Muslims.

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NOTES

- ¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper. I have tried to incorporate their comments and suggestions to the best of my ability. Nevertheless, any flaws in the paper are wholly mine.
- ² Violence associated with the Muslim insurgency has also been reported in the Malay-Muslim-dominated districts of the province of Songkhla bordering Pattani.
- ³ The status of Muslims in Thailand has become highly political in that even the population figure for the Muslims in Thailand is a contested issue. Official reports have often given a conservative estimate of four percent (Omar 1992: 1). Scholars have, however, given higher figures for the Muslim population ranging from six percent (Scupin 1998: 229) to eight percent (Gilquin 2005). Omar (1992: 2) says that the 1977 figure given by the Central Committee for Islamic Affairs of Thailand is ten percent. The fact that the 'official' Muslim figure in Thailand is highly controversial shows the differences in attitude of each group toward the other. While the state would want to see a lower figure for the Muslim population of Thailand, the Muslims themselves feel that they are being misrepresented in Thailand.
- ⁴ These categories are self-defined, state-defined and academically defined. See works by Omar (1992), Scupin (1998) and the various articles in the edited volume by Forbes (1989).
- ⁵ Food and dress are seen as principal cultural markers. While Thai Malays are increasingly consuming *halal* Thai food, especially in the small diners and restaurants, Malay food is cooked at home and sold in the village coffee shops. Thai Buddhists, for example, recognize *roti*, various versions of a flatbread made of wheat with origins in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, as typical Muslim food. Another typically considered Muslim dish is *kaeng matsaman* or 'Mussalman curry'. A distinguishing ingredient in this curry is the use of ground roasted nuts, which is seen as a Malay feature. So, we can see how, in this instance, Thai Buddhists themselves make little distinction between Malays and Muslims and conflate the two categories.
- ⁶ Islam is seen as an intrinsic part of Malay identity in these areas. My Thai Malay

informants often conflated the two identities as if they were one. In fact, the term used to describe Malays in the local Malay dialect, *nayu*, is often used to describe Muslims as well. Thus a Muslim from Singapore will be referred to as *nayu singapore* while a Thai-speaking Muslim from Bangkok would be referred to as *nayu bakok*. Another important observation of the conflation of these two identities is the presence of many Arabic-derived words in the Malay language and the extensive use of Jawi, an Arabic-derived script, to write Malay in southern Thailand. In this, southern Thailand presents a unique contrast to the Malay communities of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, which use the Roman alphabet to write Malay. Southern Thailand can then be called the last bastion of the Jawi script in Southeast Asia where it is still seen as the proper script for writing the Malay language.

- ⁷ As argued by several scholars including Duncan McCargo (2008: xi), there were already militant attacks on security forces in the southern border provinces since December 2001. The violent incident of 2 January 2004 is seen as ushering in a new era in the story of southern violence, not merely because of the attack on the military (which had happened in the past), but because the militants effectively overpowered and outwitted the military and escaped with hundreds of military weapons. This event represented a great shame to the strength of the Thai military and by extension the Thai state and brought to the fore that the state was dealing with more sophisticated militants than the previously dismissed bandits and petty criminals.
- ⁸ On National Day 1939, the name of Thailand was changed from Prathet Sayam to Prathet Thai in Thai and from Siam to Thailand in English (Barme 1992: 147).
- ⁹ This meaning of Thailand was oft referred to by the nationalist King Vajiravudh or Rama VI (r. 1910-1925). The clearest reference to this was in an essay he wrote in 1911 in which he referred to the Thais as brave people not afraid of dying to maintain Thai freedom. 'We were born in the Thai race, we are born free [Thai], we must die free [Thai]; if we become slaves, we will no longer be Thai [free]' (Vella 1978: 91).
- ¹⁰ The Thai nationalist Luang Wichit Wathakan was an important figure connected with the name change. He claimed that the name Siam was invented by the Angkor rulers from whom the Chinese and later the Europeans adopted the name (Stowe 1991:122). Having obtained a map produced by the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient which showed areas in the Indochinese peninsula, Southern China, Burma and Assam inhabited by the 'Thai race', Wichit argued for the name change saying that Siam bore no relation to the Thai people. Further Siam meant 'black' or 'dark' and so it was an inappropriate name for the Thai people who were a yellow-skinned race (Barme 1992: 148). Wichit also opined that all Thais, wherever they were, considered themselves independent since Thai meant 'slaves to none' (Barme 1992: 149).
- ¹¹ Malay belongs to the Austronesian language family, whose languages span halfway around the globe. In Southeast Asia, Austronesian languages including Malay and Tagalog are spoken in island Southeast Asia including Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines.
- ¹² Singapore is a classic example where as an 'Indian', I am supposed to speak Tamil and be a Hindu!
- ¹³ In September 2005 in the village of Tanyong Limo in Narathiwat province, women and children blockaded a village where two marines had been taken hostage after the mysterious fatal shooting of two villagers in a teashop. As a result, security forces could not enter the village while the two marines were bludgeoned to death (Duncan 2008: 113). On 4 January 2007, women demonstrators in front of a police station in Pattani where a murder suspect was being held forced the police to release the suspect (Duncan 2008: 166-67).
- ¹⁴ I thank one of the reviewers of this paper for highlighting this point to me and I

have taken the liberty of working the reviewer's comment into my argument.

- ¹⁵ Andrew Cornish *Whose Place is This?: Malay Rubber Producers and Thai Government Officials in Yala*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press (Studies in Contemporary Thailand No. 5) 1997.

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